Journalism

From: Mrs. Beecher and Mr. Costello

Hello All,

We were going to move on from our “fake news” unit if classes had continued as usual, but obviously these are unusual times. Fake news is spreading even faster than the coronavirus. Consequently, we have put together a series of readings and questions dealing with the spread of false information about the virus through social media/the Internet.

Please read them in order, then answer the related questions.

- The first article is from the New York Times (Surge of Virus Misinformation Stumps Facebook and Twitter) describes the scope of the problem.

- The second (Fight Against Coronavirus Misinformation Shows What Big Tech Can Do When It Really Tries) is from Consumer Reports - a very well respected magazine that evaluates the quality of things people buy, from cars to lipstick – and answers the question “Well, if Amazon, Facebook and YouTube are so smart and powerful, why don’t they block the false information?”

- The third (‘NOT TRUE’: Oprah Winfrey debunks bizarre QAnon conspiracy theory spreading across the Internet) from the Washington Post, describes what happened when Oprah, became the target of a notoriously bad actor on the web. and what this says not about the failure of big media platforms to block obviously false material but also the public’s complicity in spreading it.

The last part – the public’s willingness to spread false news – is the crucial point and why we have spent so much time on this issue.

An acquaintance told me this week she was going to start gargling with salt because she had heard that doing so would kill any coronavirus in your throat. I checked and although not harmful, this is NOT TRUE.

Your Assignment:

You have been receiving training on identifying reputable sources and debunking false information for several weeks now. As you have learned from the three articles, defeating the spread of false information is not something that can be left to others. Everyone must do their part. So:

1. Tell me how you would go about checking the truthfulness of the “gargle with salt” report

2. Describe three things you could tell your family and friends about how to find good information online, and how to check out material they get through social media.

You can email the answers to Mrs. Beecher or Mr. Costello, or write them out if you do not have access to email. Feel free to email us with questions. This is not a test. What we are interested in is your understanding of the problem of false news and what to do about it.
Surge of Virus Misinformation Stumps Facebook and Twitter
Secret labs. Magic cures. Government plots. Despite efforts by social media companies to stop it, false information about the coronavirus is proliferating around the world.

By Sheera Frenkel, Davey Alba and Raymond Zhong

SAN FRANCISCO — First, there were conspiratorial whispers on social media that the coronavirus had been cooked up in a secret government lab in China. Then there were bogus medicines: gels, liquids and powders that immunized against the virus.

And then there were the false claims about governments and celebrities and racial unrest. Taiwan was covering up virus deaths, and the illness was spiraling out of control. Bill Gates, the Microsoft co-founder who now runs a philanthropic organization, was behind the spread of the virus. Italians were marching in the streets, accusing Chinese people of bringing the illness to their country. None of it was true.

As the coronavirus has spread across the world, so too has misinformation about it, despite an aggressive effort by social media companies to prevent its dissemination. Facebook, Google and Twitter said they were removing misinformation about the coronavirus as fast as they could find it and were working with the World Health Organization and other government organizations to ensure that people got accurate information.

But a search by The New York Times found dozens of videos, photographs and written posts on each of the social media platforms that appeared to have slipped through the cracks. The posts were not limited to English. Many were originally in languages ranging from Hindi and Urdu to Hebrew and Farsi, reflecting the trajectory of the virus as it has traveled around the world.

Security researchers have even found that hackers were setting up threadbare websites that claimed to have information about the coronavirus. The sites were actually digital traps, aimed at stealing personal data or breaking into the devices of people who landed on them.

The spread of false and malicious content about the coronavirus has been a stark reminder of the uphill battle fought by researchers and internet companies. Even when the companies are determined to protect the truth, they are often outgunned and outwitted by the internet’s liars and thieves.

There is so much inaccurate information about the virus, the W.H.O. has said it was confronting a “infodemic.”

“I see misinformation about the coronavirus everywhere. Some people are panicking, and looking to magical cures, and other people are spreading conspiracies,” said Austin Chiang, a gastroenterologist at Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia.
In Taiwan, virus-related misinformation on social media has fed concerns that China might be using the crisis to undermine the government of the self-ruling island.

In recent weeks, there have been posts on Facebook and other sites claiming that Taiwan has concealed large numbers of coronavirus infections. There have been fake but official-looking documents promising giveaways of face masks and vaccines. A screen capture from a television news broadcast was doctored to say that President Tsai Ing-wen had contracted the disease and was in quarantine.

In a statement to The Times, Taiwan’s foreign minister, Joseph Wu, blamed China’s “internet armies” for the deluge of falsehoods, though his office declined to elaborate on how he came to that conclusion. China’s Taiwan Affairs Office didn’t respond to a faxed request for comment.

The Communist Party claims Taiwan as part of China’s territory, and Taiwanese officials have long accused Beijing of manipulating both traditional news media and social platforms to turn Taiwanese citizens against President Tsai, who opposes closer ties with China.

Summer Chen, the editor in chief of Taiwan FactCheck Center, a watchdog group that debunks online rumors and hoaxes, said her team had been busier since the outbreak began than it was ahead of Taiwan’s presidential election in January, when the island was on high alert for potential Chinese meddling.

“Throughout this whole epidemic, people have really liked conspiracy theories,” Ms. Chen said. “Why is it that during epidemics people don’t choose to believe accurate scientific information?”

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter all said they were making efforts to point people back to reliable sources of medical information and had direct lines of communication to the W.H.O. and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Facebook said it bans content that could cause people harm, such as claims that discourage treatment or taking appropriate precautions against the coronavirus. Posts and videos that shared conspiracy theories were clearly marked as false, once they had been reviewed by fact checkers.

When Facebook users attempt to share them, a message pops up alerting the user that the post includes information that has been deemed false by fact checkers.

Those measures, however, have not stopped people in private Facebook groups from linking to and sharing misinformation surrounding the virus. In private Facebook groups, including one that totals over 100,000 members, conspiracy theories spread that the coronavirus was an invention of the pharmaceutical industry, intended to sell the public on more expensive drugs and more vaccines.

While many posts simply encouraged people to take vitamins and eat a balanced diet to boost their immune system, others offered promises of immunity or cures if certain combinations of
powders and drinks were consumed. Some were even more dangerous. The Food and Drug Administration referred to one “miracle mineral solution” posted many times on Facebook and Twitter as “the same as drinking bleach.”

Dr. Chiang, the gastroenterologist, recently helped start the Association for Healthcare Social Media, a group dedicated to encouraging more health care professionals to post on social media so that they can dispel some of the misinformation.

“People are looking for good sources of information because a lot of what they see, when they log into their social media platforms, is just scaring them,” he said.

While Twitter acknowledged the presence of some of this content on its network, Del Harvey, Twitter’s vice president of trust and safety, said the company has not seen “large-scale, coordinated” efforts to misinform people about the coronavirus. After The New York Times contacted Twitter with examples of tweets containing health misinformation about coronavirus, some owners of the accounts were suspended “for spam.”

Facebook said that in addition to working closely with health organizations, it was offering W.H.O. free ad space to try and point people toward accurate information on the coronavirus. The company said that it was removing posts that discouraged people from seeking treatment or suggested remedies that could cause physical harm and that it was placing warning labels on posts that were rated false by their fact checkers.

YouTube, which is owned by Google, also said it was working closely with W.H.O. to help combat misinformation. YouTube’s spokesman, Farshad Shadloo, said the company had policies that prohibited videos that “promoted medically unsubstantiated methods to prevent the coronavirus in place of seeking medical treatment.”

Dozens of YouTube videos, however, included titles that suggested the video offered a cure for the virus. In others, the comment sections below the videos included links to pages offering a range of alternative, unsubstantiated treatments.

In some cases, those links have led people to websites that lure people in with the promise of a cure, but actually steal credit card information and other personal details.

The cybersecurity firm Check Point said more than 4,000 coronavirus-related websites that include words like “corona” or “covid” have been registered since the beginning of the year. Of those, 3 percent were considered malicious and another 5 percent were suspicious.

Research by Sophos, a cybersecurity company, has shown an uptick in these so-called spear-phishing messages targeting people in Italy, where coronavirus infections have surged in recent weeks. Those messages included a link to a Microsoft Word document that claimed to list cures for the virus. When downloaded, it installed malicious malware on people’s computers.
Last month, W.H.O. also put out a warning about fake emails from apparent W.H.O. representatives. The emails carried malicious code aimed at breaking into someone’s computing device.

John Gregory, the deputy health editor for NewsGuard, a start-up that tries to stop false stories from spreading on the internet, said the medical element to coronavirus misinformation made it different from other conspiracies the public has dealt with.

Because the information about the virus is “playing out in real time, it’s always going to be easier for someone to make a false claim,” Mr. Gregory said. “Then, there’s a separation of a few days before anyone with a scientific background, or journalists, are able to debunk the claim.”
Questions for NY Times and False Information Online

When you come across a word you do not know in reading this story – look up the definition.

List five of them here:

Word 1: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 2: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 3: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 4: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 5: ___________________________
Definition:
After you have read the article, please answer the following questions:

1. The article says that some “threadbare” sites about the coronavirus have a specific and criminal goal. What is it?

2. How do some Facebook users get around Facebook’s attempts to discourage the spread of false information?

3. John Gregory, the deputy health editor for NewsGuard, a start-up that tries to stop false stories from spreading on the internet, said the coronavirus is difficult to deal with because ......
Fight Against Coronavirus Misinformation Shows What Big Tech Can Do When It Really Tries

But technology companies' unprecedented efforts reveal the limitations of policing their vast platforms

By Kaveh Waddell

March 11, 2020

Big tech companies are being confronted with the swift spread of online misinformation about the coronavirus—from dangerous health advice to racist conspiracies to scammy products—and the industry has launched what looks like all-out war to fight it. It's a high-stakes test case for defense operations at companies including Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Twitter, and experts say their efforts appear more aggressive than any previous crackdown on false and misleading information.

The push shows how much the platforms can do when they pull out all the stops, according to scholars who study the subject—going far beyond their efforts leading up to the 2016 election, when political misinformation became a prominent issue, and in the years since. But it also reveals some inherent limitations to fighting bad information, even with Big Tech’s vast resources.

“They’ve definitely been more aggressive in responding to the coronavirus crisis than they have been in going after political misinformation,” says Paul Barrett, a New York University professor who studies online misinformation.

The companies are up against a buffet of misleading and potentially dangerous info, such as hoaxes alleging that the Chinese government or the pharmaceutical industry cooked up the coronavirus in a lab, false claims that it’s a stolen bioweapon, or a widely promoted “cure” that the FDA has likened to drinking bleach.

The response may be more forceful than ever before, but these aren’t some newly developed break-in-case-of-emergency superweapons, experts say. “All of a sudden, they’re doing some things that are actually quite effective. And they’re not magical, either—they didn’t require years and years of research,” says Jevin
West, director of the Center for an Informed Public at the University of Washington.

The tech platforms’ weapons in the fight fall into three main categories: promoting good information, demoting bad information, and keeping misinformation from appearing in the first place.

The first method—highlighting the best information—is widespread. Search for “coronavirus” on Google, and you’ll get the latest stories from trusted news sources, followed by links to the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—all with bright red badging. Those links are followed by page after page of authoritative information from public health organizations. The same search on YouTube, which is owned by Google, brings up reliable news clips. Several companies, including Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Twitter, are giving away advertising slots to trusted organizations and displaying prominent links on the social networks’ home pages or atop virus-related search results.

The second tactic is to take direct aim at misinformation after it’s posted. Facebook, for example, solicits feedback from dozens of outside fact-checking organizations, like PolitiFact, the Associated Press, and Reuters, which can label claims in “public, newsworthy posts” as false. When they do, Facebook attaches a message to the disputed post—the label on one recent post said, “The primary claims in the information are factually inaccurate”—and keeps it from spreading widely on newsfeeds and in groups. Facebook says it’s also removing some of the most egregious posts wholesale, and Amazon has told multiple news outlets that it took down more than a million products that had false claims about preventing, treating, or curing coronavirus and COVID-19, the disease it causes.

Finally, several companies have banned advertisements that disseminate bad information or try to make a quick buck off the virus. Facebook, for example, no longer allows any advertisements for face masks—protective wear that’s vital for health workers but that the CDC does not recommend for most other people—and Google and Twitter have announced policies against ads capitalizing on the crisis. Google says it has blocked “thousands of ads” related to the epidemic over the past month and a half.
West and other misinformation researchers are hard at work testing the effectiveness of the companies’ interventions. The results aren’t in yet, but anecdotally, West says the simple banners at the top of virus-related searches and free ads from the likes of the WHO and CDC are “by far the most effective thing we’ve seen.”

**The Limits of Misinformation Defenses**

The companies’ efforts, while beyond what they’ve done in years past, are nowhere near shutting down the online coronavirus “infodemic.” Misinformation still thrives on these sites—in one example, Consumer Reports’ Ryan Felton reported on fraudulent virus-related products on Amazon, which he found are still available even after the site’s purge; others have reported that price-gouging remains rampant on the platform, too, as do pernicious lies on Facebook and Twitter.

“I don’t think we’ve ever seen the social media world come together on an issue like this—and yet still it’s falling short,” says UW’s West.

That’s in part because the platforms’ misinformation defenses have never been tested with a crisis this fast-moving and big. Election-related skullduggery orbits one country or region at a time; other health- or science-related misinformation operates at a constant hum rather than inundating the internet all at once in the span of a few months. “There’s always been health misinformation on Facebook,” says Renee DiResta, research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory. “But now the entire world is posting about the same thing.”

Even in an all-hands moment like this one, some efforts are controversial. For instance, Barrett says he supports removing “provably false content”—especially when health and safety are at stake. But takedowns can also backfire, DiResta says. “That then creates the perception that the information is being censored, and there’s a little bit of concern that that creates or feeds a conspiracy that the platform is trying to prevent you from knowing the truth.”

In interviews with the press, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has promised that better artificial intelligence tools are under development that could overcome the enormity of the misinformation problem. But an automated solution that works across languages and at scale is unlikely to arrive anytime soon, experts say. For now, Facebook uses AI to surface claims that need a closer look and pass them to
fact-checkers, who are often overwhelmed. “This is not something AI does well,” West says. “There’s too much context and too many ways to subvert and adapt to the system.”

A Google spokesman contacted by CR pointed to Google-owned YouTube’s work to staunch misinformation as a sign of the company’s progress in this area. “In 2019 alone, we launched over 30 different changes to reduce recommendations of borderline content and harmful misinformation, including climate change misinformation and other types of conspiracy videos,” said Farshad Shadloo. “Thanks to this change, watch time this type of content gets from non-subscribed recommendations has dropped by over 70 percent in the U.S.”

Facebook and Twitter did not respond to CR’s requests for comment on the issue.

The companies haven’t exhausted all their options. But there’s likely a ceiling to their ability to keep bad information away from their users, especially during a sudden global crisis.

“They could do more—but they can’t do everything,” says Justin Brookman, CR’s advocacy director for consumer privacy and technology. “They can’t solve for human nature; they can’t police that racist or confusing or crazy email forward from Grandma.”

Individuals can also use the “SIFT technique” to investigate questionable content. The acronym stands for Stop, Investigate the source, Find better coverage, and Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original context. Developed by Mike Caulfield, a digital information literacy expert at Washington State University, the method can help readers separate reliable information from sketchy posts online.

**Extending the Coronavirus Playbook**

Experts tell CR they hope the tech platforms transfer their vigor for battling coronavirus misinformation to the many other flavors of falsehood and trickery that live on their sites. If the coronavirus playbook were reapplied broadly, “you would see all the tech companies take a hard line on untrue content,” says Melissa Ryan, CEO of CARD Strategies, a consulting firm that researches misinformation. “They would be able to do it without political consideration.”

But the companies have been reluctant to give the same treatment to political issues, or even some scientific ones that have taken on political overtones.
Consider climate change, another matter that affects public health where there is broad consensus in the scientific community. You won’t see any blaring warnings or curated fact-checks when searching for climate information on these platforms.

“Political influence questions definitely play a part” in the companies’ less rigorous policing of climate misinformation, says Sam Gregory, a global misinformation expert at the nonprofit Witness.

And lax policies extend further into the political world, where even bald falsehoods, if uttered by a politician or in a political ad, are often insulated from platforms’ rules barring certain types of misinformation.

“There’s an understandable reluctance to appear to be clamping down on one or the other side in the political sphere, and I think that probably helps explain the distinction—why there’s a difference between what we’re seeing in recent weeks with the health crisis as opposed to what we see generally in the political realm,” says NYU’s Barrett.
Name: _________________________________________

Questions for Fight Against Coronavirus: Misinformation shows What Big Tech Can Do When It Really Tries

When you come across a word you do not know in reading this story – look up the definition.

List five of them here:

Word 1: ___________________________
Definition:____________________________

Word 2: ___________________________
Definition:____________________________

Word 3: ___________________________
Definition:____________________________

Word 4: ___________________________
Definition:____________________________

Word 5: ___________________________
Definition:____________________________
Note: This article was published in Consumer Reports. Although it is a famous publication with a great reputation, it was not included in the list of best new sources that we looked over because it specializes in reviewing products – cars, washing machines, shampoo, insurance policies, etc. - rather than covering general news.

After you have read the article, please answer the following questions:

1. The article says that the tech platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc., - are using three weapons to fight false information. What are they?

2. Jevin West, the director of the Center for an Informed Public at the University of Washington, and other researchers are testing how well the moves against false coronavirus news are working. What does he say seems to be the most effective way to make sure that searches turn up good information?

3. Despite their efforts, West said that the efforts by Amazon and other companies were not entirely successful. Why is that?
4. What did Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg say his company was planning to do to block misinformation? Do experts think this will work?

5. What is the SIFT technique?

6. The article says that experts hope that the tech companies extend the steps they are taking against coronavirus misinformation to other issues as well. But why does the article say they are unwilling to do this?
‘NOT TRUE’: Oprah Winfrey debunks bizarre QAnon conspiracy theory spreading across the Internet

By Antonia Noori Farzan

March 18, 2020 at 6:24 a.m. EDT

Late Tuesday night, as results trickled in from Democratic primary elections and the number of people infected by the novel coronavirus continued to climb, Oprah Winfrey’s name began trending on Twitter.

An unhinged conspiracy theory had taken root, claiming that she was arrested for her role in a global sex trafficking ring. It reached a point where Winfrey felt compelled to address the rumors, which quickly spread across the Internet as people bored and trapped at home searched for some form of entertainment.

“Just got a phone call that my name is trending,” Winfrey wrote on Twitter early Wednesday morning. “And being trolled for some awful FAKE thing. It’s NOT TRUE. Haven’t been raided or arrested. Just sanitizing and self-distancing with the rest of the world. Stay safe everybody.”

The outlandish allegations were reportedly propagated by online devotees of QAnon, the bizarre conspiracy theory that “centers on the idea that an anonymous government official, or ‘Q,’ has been secretly sharing messages and symbols that serve as evidence of a hidden plot to overthrow Trump,” as The Washington Post’s Tony Romm and Colby Itkowitz previously reported. Followers, most of them enthusiastic supporters of President Trump, believe many elite politicians and celebrities belong to an international cabal of pedophiles and will soon be arrested.

Over the past few days, QAnon adherents have been sharing a viral Facebook post that claims coronavirus is “the biggest covert U.S. intelligence operation that the world has ever seen.” The author predicted the disease would provide cover for the arrests of prominent individuals including actor Tom Hanks, who was recently released from an Australian hospital after testing positive for the coronavirus, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and, of course, Winfrey.

The conspiracy theory gained steam on Sunday, when one Facebook user posted photos of caution tape surrounding a Mediterranean villa, claiming it was Winfrey’s home in Boca Raton, Fla., and that authorities were “excavating the property and digging up the tunnels.” (Winfrey owns many houses, but none of them are in Florida.) On YouTube, a man going by “Tank” gave a live dispatch from a random parking lot, claiming to have received word that “Hollywood pedophiles” were being arrested and Winfrey’s house was suspected to be “some kind of child trafficking location.”
Another user posted a video of armed police officers kicking in the door of an ordinary-looking bungalow, claiming it was leaked body camera footage from the “raid” on Winfrey’s home.

Under ordinary circumstances, the easily debunked story might not have spread beyond the usual fringe online communities. But with most of the country under self-imposed quarantine and eager for a distraction on Wednesday night, the conspiracy theory reached a captive audience. By early Thursday morning, “#opraharrested” was trending alongside “OPRAHDIDWHAT.”

Finally, Winfrey stepped in to dispel the rumor, prompting HuffPost and New York Magazine reporter Yashar Ali to tweet, “I can’t believe Oprah had to even acknowledge the existence of a QAnon hoax”

The director Ava DuVernay, a friend and occasional collaborator of Winfrey’s, wrote: “Trolls + bots began this disgusting rumor. Mean-spirited minds kept it going. #Oprah has worked for decades on behalf of others. Given hundreds of millions to individuals + causes in need. Shared her own abuse as a child to help folks heal. Shame on all who participated in this.”

At a time when many tech platforms are struggling to fight the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus, some observed that seeing people spread a baseless hoax didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

“Folks believing that Oprah story just made the necessity of relying on each other for survival feel a lot more daunting,” tweeted the writer Jamilah Lemieux.
Name: ___________________

When you come across a word you do not know in reading this story – look up the definition.

List five of them here:

Word 1: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 2: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 3: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 4: ___________________________
Definition:

Word 5: ___________________________
Definition:
After you have read the article, please answer the following questions:

1. How does this article describe QAnon?

2. According to the article, what does QAnon the coronavirus is the cover for something. What is I?